



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804

March 24, 2016

Dear Interested Citizen:

Thank you for your thoughtful reviews and comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to accept the donation of approximately 214.8 acres of land adjoining Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ravalli County, northeast of Stevensville. This generous donation is offered as a bequest in the last will and testament of Ms. Priscilla Antrim, the late owner of the property. Benefits of acquiring this property include gaining additional elk winter range for the WMA and enhancing public recreational access to the WMA and nearby National Forest lands.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission and the State Board of Land Commissioners approve this donation as proposed. Upon completion of the public involvement process, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final. The decision document also summarizes all public comments on the donation.

FWP will request approval for its acceptance of the subject lands at the monthly Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting scheduled for April 14, 2016 in Helena. FWP will also need approval from the State Board of Land Commissioners, likely at its scheduled meeting on April 20 in Pablo. These meetings are open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission and Land Board meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Arnold', is written above the printed name.

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor

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**Decision Notice for
The Antrim Addition to Threemile Wildlife Management Area**

Prepared by:
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 2 Wildlife
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804
March 24, 2016

Proposal

Under the Proposed Action (Alternative A), Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposed to accept the donation of fee-title ownership of the Antrim Addition adjoining Threemile WMA in Ravalli County, northeast of Stevensville. The majority of Threemile WMA was purchased by FWP for elk winter range in 1967 and 1968 and currently consists of 6,169 acres. The proposed 214.8-acre Antrim Addition shares 1 mile of common boundary with the WMA and 0.9 miles of common boundary with two USFS parcels adjacent to the WMA. This generous donation is offered according to the last will and testament of Ms. Priscilla Antrim, the late owner of the subject property, with the intent that the gift be accomplished by early 2016.

The existence of Threemile Creek Road (USFS Road 640) makes the Antrim Addition potentially desirable for development, although the rugged terrain and steep hillsides may deter potential developers. However, the flat ground along the Threemile Creek and its unnamed side channel could draw potential development interest. The primary benefits of acquiring this property would be to provide for elk winter range and to protect that habitat from possible future subdivision and/or development, as well as offering improved public access.

FWP would manage the property in accordance with the existing Management Plan for Threemile WMA (available upon request). The WMA is currently open annually for public access from noon May 15 through December 1, and closed from December 2 until noon May 15 to provide undisturbed winter range for elk and other wildlife. The exception is that the area north of, and including, USFS Road 640 in the northeastern WMA is open to nonmotorized public access year-round. However, the entire WMA is closed to hunting, fishing and trapping from December 2 until noon May 15. In this year-round portion of the WMA, motorized travel is allowed only on open roads (USFS Roads 640 and 1344). The Antrim property would be subject to the same use regulations as for Threemile WMA. Therefore, if added to the WMA, an estimated 170 acres of the 215-acre Antrim Addition would fall under the “open year-round designation,” with the remaining 45 acres subject to the winter closure. (See Appendix A of the Draft EA for a summary of the current public use rules for Threemile WMA.)

FWP currently maintains the fence between the two properties, but would likely move that fence to the new boundary upon acquisition.

Under the No Action Alternative B, FWP would not accept the bequest. Under the terms of the Ms. Antrim's will, the bequest would lapse and the property distributed to her main heirs. FWP cannot know if the heirs would keep the property themselves or rent or sell it, but under private ownership or sale (likely to a private party), subdivision and/or development would be more likely than under the proposed action alternative. Future public access to the property would be at the discretion of private owners.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (Draft EA, "Proposed Antrim Addition to Wildlife Management Area") for public review of this proposal on February 8, 2016 and accepted public comment until March 8, 2016.

Legal notice of the Antrim Addition EA (Appendix A) was published twice each in the following newspapers: *Bitterroot Star* (Stevensville; Sept 14 & 21), *Independent Record* (Helena; Feb 5 & 12), *Missoulian* (Feb 5 & 12), and *Ravalli Republic* (Hamilton; Feb 5 & 12). FWP issued a statewide news release regarding this proposal on February 11, 2016.

FWP mailed 13 copies of the EA, and emailed approximately 42 notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and non-FWP agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov>, "Public Notices") beginning February 8 through March 8, 2016.

A public hearing to explain the project, answer questions, and take public comment was held in Corvallis on February 18 (6:30 p.m. at the Teller Wildlife Refuge's Slack Barn), and 3 members of the public attended.

Summary of Public Comment

FWP received 9 emailed or telephoned comments regarding the proposed hunting access (Appendix B). Eight comments were from members of the public (5 from the Bitterroot Valley, and 1 each from Emigrant, St. Regis, and Superior); and 1 comment was from Hellgate Hunters and Anglers in Missoula. All comments were in support of FWP accepting the donation of the Antrim Addition. No one was in opposition to the proposal.

Three people attended the public meeting held February 18 at the Teller Wildlife Refuge near Corvallis. All three offered testimony supporting FWP's acceptance of the donation (Table 1), with one person providing testimony both as a citizen and as a representative of Bitterrooters for Planning. No comments were received in opposition to the proposal, and two attendees who personally knew and worked with Priscilla Antrim were able to provide additional background and history on past land management.

Participants in the public hearing also discussed ways to appropriately recognize the gift of public land being made by Ms. Priscilla Antrim.

Table 1. Public testimony on FWP’s proposal to accept the donation of the Antrim property into Threemile WMA, received at the public hearing held February 18 in Corvallis.

<i>[Representing the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association] The RCFWA is for public access and we agree with the acquisition of this land into the rest of the WMA for hunting, fishing, etc. We recognize its importance to preserving big game winter range. We’re all for it.</i>
<i>[Representing Bitterrooters for Planning] We enthusiastically support this. Priscilla Antrim was a longtime member, and this sets a great example for folks to consider if they have land. This is great for future generations.</i>
<i>Personally, I’ve lived here in 1983, and have enjoyed the WMA, and engaged in different efforts like travel planning, roads, etc. to provide contribution to habitat and wildlife management here and in surrounding lands. I was granted permission to hunt and access Priscilla Antrim’s property and enjoyed it for 3 decades. On and near the property, I have seen the ridge above the drainage utilized by thousands of elk over 30 years. It’s a very prominent sight line to Cooney Ridge. I’m looking forward to seeing the data from the North Sapphires Elk Research Project related to this land. This is a valuable travel way, I’ve watched elk use the ridge and security habitat on the north slope, and enter the WMA to graze. Made me realize how much ground elk could cover. Black bears, mule deer, WTD seen as well, and bobcat, full range of wildlife. I strongly support the acquisition. Public ownership as an alternative to private development is very important, because we could have very negative effect on wildlife and habitat conditions. I am also concerned about the road conditions. There are wetlands here, we’ve found long-tailed salamanders and possibly Coeur D’Alene salamanders, tailed frogs in the creek, and in tire tracks. I’d ask FWP to consider, possibly at the west side of the property, a plaque in recognition of Ms. Antrim’s stewardship while she was alive, and her commitment to future generations</i>
<i>We should monitor wildlife closely during the timber harvest to see their response. USFS needs to work on the road, especially near the Spranger property, need to fix so water doesn’t run off into the creek. The culvert is shotgunned where it comes out. Should put culverts in the unnamed drainage where it crosses the road, should also get culvert for Threemile Creek here. Also, the property was logged in 2006; line-skidded, left a lot of snags. Harvested 149,000 board feet. Thinned the thicker areas on top to 40%, then lined down to the riparian area, favoring larch and ponderosa pine. There have been lots of elk in the meadow up the unnamed drainage, and lots of woodpeckers, and golden eagles. Also, lots of 4-wheelers trespass near the head of the unnamed draw, and have grow marijuana here.</i>

Response to Public Comment

The following comments and FWP responses encompass specific issues or suggestions received during the public comment period. (The “Comment #” is the Comment # in Appendix B, sometimes with paragraph number/s also included.)

Comment 7. *My only concern with this addition is that FWP continues to allow yearlong access through the WMA on USFS Road 640.*

FWP Response: USFS Road 640, maintained by the US Forest Service and Ravalli County, must remain open to allow access to land beyond the WMA. According to the original Threemile WMA Management Plan, only WMA land north of this road is accessible year-round; all WMA land to the south, which would include a small portion

of the Antrim Addition, is closed from December 1 to noon on May 15. However, FWP recognizes that this donation would add a sizeable amount of WMA land that would be open year-round. We will monitor wildlife use of the donation and may propose to amend the management plan if we deem it necessary for the protection of important big game habitat. Such amendments to the management plan would be subject to MEPA public comment requirements.

Comment 8 (para 2): Management should just continue with the same practices for deer and elk as winter habitat.

FWP Response: As part of the WMA, this addition would be managed in accordance with the current Threemile WMA Management Plan.

Regional Supervisor's recommendation on FWP's acceptance of the donated addition to Threemile WMA

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary. With the addition of this Decision Notice, the Draft EA is hereby made the Final EA.

This proposal received strong support from the public, with no one expressing opposition to the action. It would conserve important native fish and wildlife habitat and secure fall hunting access.

In light of these considerations, I am pleased to recommend that FWP accept the donation of the 214.8 acres adjoining Threemile WMA, with an expression of gratitude to Ms. Priscilla Antrim for her generous gift to Montana.



Randy Arnold
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

3/24/2016

Date

Appendix A

Legal Notice for the Proposed Antrim Addition to Threemile WMA

PUBLIC COMMENT SOUGHT

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invites public review of its proposal to accept the donation of approximately 214.8 acres of land adjoining Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ravalli County, northeast of Stevensville. This generous donation is offered as a bequest in the last will and testament of Ms. Priscilla Antrim, the late owner of the property. Benefits of acquiring this property include gaining additional elk winter range for the WMA and enhancing public recreational access to the WMA and nearby National Forest lands.

A draft environmental assessment (EA) has been prepared for this proposal. The EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website <http://fwp.mt.gov> ("Submit Public Comments," beginning February 5), or it may be obtained by mail from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula 59804; by phoning 406-542-5540; or by emailing shrose@mt.gov. Comments may also be directed to Sharon Rose by mail, phone or email at these contacts. Comments must be received by FWP no later than 5:00 p.m. on March 7¹, 2016.

FWP will hold a public hearing to discuss the proposal and take public comment, in Corvallis on February 18 (Thursday) at 6:30 p.m. at the Teller Wildlife Refuge's Slack Barn at 1180 Chaffin Lane (1 mile north of Corvallis on the Eastside Highway, turn west onto Quast Lane and go 0.3 mile, turn left/south onto Chaffin and 0.15 mile ahead is the driveway).

¹ Note--Comment deadline was extended to March 8, because the EA was not posted on FWP's website until February 8.

Appendix B

Comments received by FWP on the Draft EA for the proposed 214.8-acre Antrim Addition to Threemile Wildlife Management Area. (Comments received via E = email, Ph = Telephone.)

Commenter #	Via	Para-graph	Comment
1	E		WOW!!!! I think that sums up my comment. I will say, I see no reason not to honor Ms. Priscilla Antrim request, and accept her generous donation!!!!
2	E		A strong support of this proposal from local resident
3	E		Good Idea. Adding land to 3 mile WMA!!
4	E		Great if you can take on that land through the donation. Good, sound acquisition
5	Ph		Relative to the land bequethed to FWP, this is a real good amount of land. It's something FWP should accept and add to Threemile WMA and to public access.
6	E		I would like to say add the Antrim addition to the Three Mile game range, it would be great.
7	E		I strongly support FWP accepting the donation of the Antrim property to become an addition to the Threemile WMA. The addition of this property to the WMA will maintain connectivity to public and private lands to the north of the WMA as well as maintain the natural characteristics of the Threemile Creek drainage. My only concern with this addition is that FWP continues to allow yearlong access through the WMA on USFS Road 640.
8	Ph	1	I support the acquisition of the new acreage for Threemile WMA from the lady who passed away.
		2	Management should just continue with the same practices for deer and elk as winter habitat.
9	E	1	Hellgate Hunters and Anglers support the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks acquiring the approximately 214.8 acres of land adjoining Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ravalli County.
		2	Our members include over 300 hunters and anglers who value public recreational access. We're thankful that hunters and anglers will continue to be able to access this property, which improves access to adjoining public lands. Our hope is FWP will add this acreage to the existing Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA).
		3	We recognize the importance of:
		4	•The addition adds to the supply of fertile land for wildlife corridors and expanded roaming capabilities for winter elk.
		5	•Adding a large parcel of adjacent, manageable land to the existing WMA for more public recreation opportunity for hunters and anglers.
		6	•The expansion for elk winter range and forage capability may limit grazing livestock.
		7	•Ability to keep natural living conditions for local surrounding herds, without considerable disturbance of human improvements to the area.
		8	•Limiting further disturbance, and development, on the elk winter range.
		9	•Ecological restoration of the 0.4 miles of Threemile Creek, and the 0.8 miles of small unnamed side channel of Threemile Creek.
		10	In summary, we strongly support the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks' acquisition of the approximately 214.8 acres of land adjoining Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ravalli County